Teach Us How To Pray
Luke 11: 1 – 13
A sermon by Rev. Dr. David Clark
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – September 28, 2025

"It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine."

I felt betrayed. None of my scholarly biblical or theological resources provided even a hint that the rapture was supposed to happen last Tuesday. You would think that's precisely the kind of thing they'd give me a heads-up about. Instead, I had to find out from a loud blonde lady on social media.

She stood in her beautiful suburban home, pictures of smiling family members plastered to the wall behind her. She said now is the time to decide if you are going to get on Jesus' party bus and escape this hellhole we're living in or get left behind. The suburbs must not be all they are cracked up to be.

Rapture believers flooded social media. One woman advised Christians to spend Tuesday outdoors because, when you floated up, you wouldn't want to get trapped against the ceiling of your living room. I saw one text thread where a woman asked a man to take care of her dog after she ascended. He shot back. "I'm not good enough to get raptured but good enough to take care of your dog?"

I thought, "Geesh, here we go again." That's all we need—more ammunition for people to discount our faith entirely.

- Where did this come from this week?
- What's it all about?
- What should you know about the rapture?

Sometimes visions are merely fantasies.

The rapture refers to the belief that Jesus will come again and literally descend from the clouds, and believers will ascend into the sky and to heaven with Jesus.

I dug around to find out who inspired last week's craze. It's Joshua Mhlakela from South Africa, who claimed to have had a vision in 2018 in which Jesus told him that he would take his church to himself on September 23, 2025.

My first thought was, “Yeah, I had a vision in 1976 about Farrah Fawcett falling in love with me, but alas, sometimes our visions are projections, not prophecy.”

Despite Jesus saying that no one knows the date or hour of his return, some people heard about his vision and lent it credence by saying, “It falls during the Jewish high-holy days, so maybe there is something to it.” The next thing you know, pretty ladies stand in doorways looking forward to escaping their suburban hellholes.

For more than 150 years, folks have gotten swept up into rapture predictions, given away their possessions, stood on hills and waited in vain, having to later justify it by saying it was a test, or a slight miscalculation--but it’s imminent.

Where does Rapture Theology come from?

The way the rapture is conceived of nowadays stems from the teachings of James Darby in 1836. He was trying to map out what the Bible said about end times. He developed a schematic that begins with his interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4, where Christ is said to return on the clouds and Christians will be taken up into heaven. From there, those left behind suffer tribulations for seven years under the antichrist until he is defeated, and then there are 1,000 years of Christ ruling the world. Then comes the final judgment, and afterwards, God creates a new heaven and a new earth, where everyone lives happily ever after. Except for the unbelievers who burn for eternity in hell.

There is no indication that anyone in the history of the church conceived of it in this way until Darby’s writings were picked up and included in the Scofield Reference Bible, while accepted as true in some churches, it largely remained on the fringes.

Hal Lindsay, in the 1970s, brought it more into the mainstream with his book, “*The Late Great Planet Earth*.” Soon, it became an evangelical tool, playing on the fear of missing out to scare people into belief. It has found its way into several movies and fan fiction, notably as the basis of the bestselling series, *"Left Behind*," by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Airplane pilots and car drivers would be slurped up into heaven, causing a wake of destruction and suffering. Children would be orphaned. All because it’s the will of an angry God.

I didn’t like what rapture thinking did to me.

I used to believe in the rapture. It's taught in many churches as an irrefutable biblical truth. I didn't know of an alternative. While it gave some dopamine hits to think I'm an insider who knew better than the masses and I was living at the critical time of history, I didn't like the way it made me feel smug, like an insider. I didn't like the way it made me feel like it was okay not to care about the environment. Recycling? Why? The world's ending. Care about poor people, civil rights? No point. Jesus is coming, focus on that. It gave implicit permission to be callous toward others and opt out of things that mattered. They cheered on Israel not because they wanted a safe place for Jewish people, but because the reformation of the Jewish state is needed for their visions of the prophecy to come true. The Israel can do no wrong crowd isn't born out of a love of the Jewish people that they think are all going to hell. It's about accelerating the end times.

They kept gearing up like it was going to happen any day. Soon. But eventually I figured out Farrah Fawcett was not going to come knocking on my door in that bathing suit she wore for the poster. And putting all my eggs in the basket of an imminent return of Christ was just as fruitless.

Modern Biblical Scholarship Debunks Left Behind Theology

Maybe rapture theology appeals to you, and that's okay. You do you. But I want you to know there is an alternative. The consensus among academic scholars of the Bible suggests that the entire construct of *Left Behind* theology is not what biblical authors intended. At all.

To reach their end-times schema, you have to piece together various passages from different parts of the Bible. Rip them out of context, and it's like you need a secret decoder ring to figure it out.

For example, in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul is giving pastoral reassurance that people's loved ones who had died before Jesus returned would also experience resurrection. The imagery comes from Paul's use of the word apantesis—the term for citizens going out to welcome a ruler and escort him back. Not an escape plan, a welcome home party. The idea is that Jesus comes to set things right, not to condemn the world.

There is also a passage in Matthew 24 where Jesus discusses how, when He comes again, two people will be standing in a field, one will be taken and one will be left

behind. However, in that passage, it appears that being the one taken is not who you want to be. The taken ones are swept away to judgment.

Helpful Ways to Picture the 2nd Coming

One of the things about the Bible is that within it, differing opinions are expressed regarding the notion of Jesus' return. Some authors believed it quite literally and thought it would happen in their lifetimes. This is why these authors did not try to change systemic injustices like misogyny, slavery, and generational poverty. There was no urgency. Jesus would come back any day and make things right, they thought.

But another strain in the New Testament emphasizes Jesus' saying that he *is always with us, unto the end of the age*. Jesus doesn't need to come again physically because he is always with us spiritually. Some see the Day of Pentecost as the day when Jesus' Spirit returns. That means our focus shifts from Jesus literally coming down from heaven to being alive in his spirit within us and among us in community.

In Matthew 25, Jesus told us we would find him in the people who are hungry, unhoused, imprisoned, sick, and marginalized. "As you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto me." He returns to us every day with opportunities to respond with empathy and compassion.

Thy Kingdom Come

When Jesus taught his followers to pray the Lord's Prayer, he didn't say for us to pray to get elevated out of our hellholes, but for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom he proclaimed was one of fairness, of inclusion, of looking out for each other, a kingdom of peace and flourishing for all. It was a kingdom not like the kingdom of empire, his followers knew, which was a kingdom of division, of privilege, of violence, vengeance, and vitriol.

Praying the Lord's prayer shifts our focus and aligns us with the values of the kingdom Christ proclaimed.

We pray and practice it: They kin-dom come—here with our hands-until this world feels like home, not a hellhole people want to escape. Jesus doesn't coach escape; he cultivates engagement. Not fear but faith. Not waiting, but working.

I've always believed that the power of prayer lies in its ability to reshape us. If we care enough to pray, we might then care enough to act, and that creates a space where God can work to make things better.

When we pray and act, that kingdom breaks in on us, and we feel the presence of God in the here and now, without having get excited for some imagined rapture to rescue us. Because Jesus is already here--in you, around you, and amongst us all.